United Nations A/58/416–S/2003/947

General Assembly
Security Council

Distr.: General
10 October 2003

Original: English

General Assembly
Fifty-eighth session
Agenda items 37 and 38

The situation in the Middle East

Question of Palestine

Security Council
Fifty-eighth year

Peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

The present report is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 57/110 of 3 December 2002. It contains replies received from the President of the Security Council and the concerned parties to the notes verbales sent by the Secretary-General pursuant to the request contained in paragraph 10 of the resolution. The report also contains the observations of the Secretary-General on the current state of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on international efforts to revive the peace process with a view to achieving a peaceful solution.

* The present report was submitted after the established deadline in order to include as much updated information as possible.

03-55381 (E) 291003

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 57/110 of 3 December 2002.

2. On 17 June 2003, pursuant to the request contained in paragraph 10 of the above-mentioned resolution, I addressed the following letter to the President of the Security Council:

> "I have the honour to refer to resolution 57/110, which the General Assembly adopted on 3 December 2002, at its fifty-seventh session, under the agenda item 'Question of Palestine'.
>
> "Paragraph 10 of the resolution requests the Secretary-General to continue his efforts with the parties concerned, and in consultation with the Security Council, towards the attainment of a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine and the promotion of peace in the region and to submit a report on these efforts and on developments on this matter.
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> "In order to fulfil my reporting responsibilities under this resolution, I should be grateful if you kindly convey to me the views of the Security Council by 31 July 2003."

3. On 31 July 2003 the following reply was received from the Security Council:

> "The Security Council continues to discuss the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question on a regular basis, in particular with monthly briefings from the Secretary-General, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Terje Roed-Larsen, or senior Secretariat staff. In September 2002 the 'Quartet' agreed that there was a need for a performance-based Road Map to a permanent two-State solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
>
> "Shortly after this meeting, following a further increase in violence and terrorist acts, Israeli reoccupation of Palestinian cities and restrictions placed on Palestinians and the resulting impact on their humanitarian situation, the Council had an open meeting and subsequently adopted resolution 1435 (2002) of 24 September 2002. In that resolution the Council reiterated its demand for the complete cessation of all acts of violence. It demanded that Israel cease measures in and around Ramallah and withdraw its occupying forces from Palestinian cities and return them to positions held prior to September 2000. The Council called on the Palestinian Authority to meet its commitment to bring to justice those responsible for terrorist acts.
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> "The Council was not able to agree on a draft resolution on 20 December 2002, tabled following the death of several UN employees working in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the destruction of a WFP [World Food Programme] warehouse.
>
> "The Council continues to follow the work of the 'Quartet', whose Road Map was officially handed over to the parties on 30 April 2003. In June 2003 the Council Presidency reiterated the support for the Road Map and the Quartet's efforts in a statement to the press. The Council continues to discuss the situation in the Middle East monthly, with regular reports from the Secretariat, the latest on 17 July 2003.

"During all these efforts, the Security Council continues to support a comprehensive and just settlement in the Middle East based on Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1397 (2002), the foundations of the Madrid Conference, the principle of land for peace, agreements previously reached by the Parties, and the initiatives of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah endorsed at the Beirut Arab League Summit."

4. In notes verbales dated 16 and 19 June 2003 to the parties concerned, I sought the positions of the Governments of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as the Palestine Liberation Organization, regarding any steps taken by them to implement the relevant provisions of the resolution. As at 17 September 2003, the following replies had been received:

Note verbale dated 25 July 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

"As the Secretary-General is aware, Israel voted against this resolution, as well as against similar resolutions adopted by the General Assembly in previous sessions. In light of the urgent need to bring an end to all acts of violence and terrorism in the region and to further the agreed negotiating process, Israel wishes to put on record, once again, its position on this matter.

"Israel views the aforementioned General Assembly resolution not only as unbalanced, but also as an undue interference in matters which the parties have agreed to resolve within the context of direct bilateral negotiations.

"The violence in the region has been a result of a Palestinian decision to abandon peace negotiations and pursue their goals through violence and terrorism. The one-sided approach reflected in the resolution, which seeks to dictate the outcome of the negotiating process, effectively rewards violence at a time when the Palestinian side should discontinue all acts of violence and terrorism and boldly pursue the path of peaceful dialogue.

"The time to put an end to such biased UN resolutions is long overdue, requiring immediate and serious consideration by the Secretary-General. These one-sided resolutions are not only out of touch with reality and anachronistic, they are counterproductive to the very spirit of peace. Rather than promoting a vision which recognizes the rights and obligations of both sides, these resolutions obscure the efforts of the parties to achieve a negotiated outcome, at a moment when encouraging changes in the Middle East region have opened a critical window of opportunity in the peace process."

Note verbale dated 4 August 2003 from the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

"As reflected in the voting results, resolution 57/110 actually garnered more support from the Assembly during the 57th session. The resolution was adopted by the General Assembly by an overwhelming majority (160-4-3), reaffirming long-established convictions and positions of the international

community on this important issue. Resolution 57/110 recalls several principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, including, inter alia, the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples and the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war. In the resolution, the Assembly also expresses its full support for the peace process and sets forth the basis for a just settlement of the question of Palestine. The resolution stresses the need for (a) the withdrawal of Israel from the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967; and (b) the realization of the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, primarily the right to self-determination and the right to their independent State. It also stresses the need for resolving the problem of the Palestine refugees in conformity with its resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948.

"The resolution also welcomes the affirmation by the Security Council of a vision of a region where two States, Israel and Palestine, live side by side within secure and recognized borders. In regard to the peace process, resolution 57/110 affirms the urgent need for the parties to cooperate with all international efforts, including the efforts of the Quartet of the United States of America, the Russian Federation, the European Union and the United Nations, to end the current tragic situation and to resume negotiations towards a final peace settlement. Resolution 57/110 also welcomes the Arab Peace Initiative adopted by the Council of the League of Arab States at its fourteenth session, held in Beirut on 27 and 28 March 2002. Moreover, the resolution emphasizes the permanent responsibility of the United Nations with regard to the question of Palestine until it is solved in all its aspects and emphasizes the importance of a more active and expanded role for the organization in the peace process.

"In addition to the reaffirmation of the above-mentioned principles and positions, resolution 57/110 addresses the grave situation on the ground in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. The resolution expresses its grave concern over the tragic events in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, since 28 September 2000 and the continued deterioration of the situation, including the rising number of deaths and injuries, mostly among Palestinian civilians, the deepening humanitarian crisis facing the Palestinian people and the widespread destruction of Palestinian property and infrastructure, both private and public, including many institutions of the Palestinian Authority. The resolution also expresses its grave concern over the repeated incursions into Palestinian-controlled areas and the reoccupation of many Palestinian population centres by the Israeli occupying forces. Resolution 57/110 also deals with another important aspect regarding the question of Palestine by affirming the illegality of Israeli settlements in the territories occupied since 1967, as well as the illegality of Israeli acts aimed at changing the status of Jerusalem.

"It is extremely regrettable that Israel has chosen to, once more, vote against resolution 57/110, defying the overwhelming majority of Member States and choosing to continue with its illegal actions and measures in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. In this connection, Israel has chosen to refuse the reasonable and sound foundation for the establishment of peace between Israel and Palestine, as well as in the Middle East region as a whole. In regard to the situation on the ground for most of the reporting period, Israeli occupying forces continued with its bloody military

campaign against the Palestinian people, committing additional grave breaches of the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949. The Israeli occupying forces have continued to commit countless war crimes, State terrorism and systematic human rights violations against the Palestinian people in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem.

"Throughout most of the reporting period, the Israeli occupying forces also continued to launch attacks in Palestinian cities, towns and refugee camps, using all forms of heavy weaponry, including tanks, helicopter gunships and warplanes. Since 28 September 2000, and as of the date of this note, the Israeli occupying forces have killed around 2,500 Palestinians. Many of the killings committed in the past year by the occupying forces have been wilful killings and targeted extrajudiciary executions. Also, more than 45,000 Palestinian have been injured, many critically and many suffering permanent disabilities. The occupying forces have also abducted and detained thousands of Palestinians, particularly males, throughout this period. In addition, thousands of Palestinians continue to be illegally held in Israeli prisons and detention centres.

"In spite of the above, the official presentation of the Road Map by the Quartet on 30 April 2003 presented the parties with a new chance to end the tragic situation on the ground and to achieve a final settlement, including the realization of the two-State solution. The Palestinian side has, indeed, accepted the Road Map and has expressed readiness for its full implementation. The Israeli side, however, after a great deal of equivocation, declared its acceptance along with a lengthy list of "concerns" or "conditions" in spite of the efforts of the Quartet and the relatively positive atmosphere. The Israeli government has yet to comply with any of its obligations under the Road Map. Nevertheless, the violent situation on the ground has greatly calmed down as a result of the efforts made by the Palestinian government to secure assurances from all Palestinian groups to a ceasefire agreement, thus providing reasonable ground for the progress in the peace process.

"The Israeli government has not removed the unauthorized outposts of the Jewish settlements as required by the Road Map, and even has continued with its settlement activities, including the building of new units and the confiscation of additional Palestinian land. In this regard, the building by Israel, the occupying Power, of an illegal wall that cuts deep into the Occupied Palestinian Territory has led to a de facto confiscation of thousands of dunums of Palestinian land. Furthermore, the wall has served to isolate many Palestinian communities from one another and has destroyed their means of livelihood. This has represented the most flagrant violation of not only the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, but of the Road Map itself. The continuation of Israeli settlement activity and the building of the illegal wall can only ensure the complete destruction of the Road Map — the latest initiative in pursuit of Palestinian-Israeli peace.

"In addition to the above, Israel has also continued with its reoccupation of many Palestinian cities. It has also continued with its imposition of severe restrictions on the movement of persons and goods within the Occupied

Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. Furthermore, Israel has also continued with its prevention of the free movement of the President of the Palestinian Authority from and to his headquarters in Ramallah. It is, indeed, inconceivable for the peace process to proceed forward with such Israeli policies and measures in place. Further efforts of the Quartet are urgently needed to achieve an end to such policies and measures.

"Palestine expresses its appreciation for the role being played by the United Nations, including the efforts and the important role played by the Secretary-General. Palestine also expresses its appreciation to the Quartet and emphasizes the need for intensifying its role to ensure the honest implementation of the Road Map in its entirety. In this regard, a monitoring mechanism, as required by the Road Map, must be established in a speedy manner to ensure such implementation."

[Original: Arabic]

Note verbale dated 3 July 2003 from the Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

"The Syrian Arab Republic supported General Assembly resolution 57/100 of 3 December 2002 entitled 'Peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine', which states that achieving a final and peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine, the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict, is imperative for the attainment of a comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East and refers to, in particular, Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

"Once again, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic affirms the statements made in the resolution respecting the illegality of the Israeli settlements in the territory occupied since 1967 and of Israeli actions aimed at changing the status of Jerusalem. The Government further affirms that those measures and settlement activities represent fundamental obstacles to the conclusion of a peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine and that successive Israeli Governments have had no political will to conclude a lasting and comprehensive peace in the region based on United Nations resolutions. The Israeli rejection of the principle of the equality of peoples with respect to rights and of the right to self-determination, which is one of the purposes and principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, represents a further obstacle to the peace that is sought.

"The Syrian Arab Republic expresses total support for the affirmation made in the resolution respecting the principle that underlies Security Council resolution 242 (1967), namely, the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, and condemns the continuation by Israel of aggressive acts and incursions into the Palestinian territories, its destruction of homes, expropriation of land and detention, assassination and expulsion from their homes, villages and towns of Palestinian persons. Such actions are indicative of the true intentions of Israel, namely, to maintain and prolong the occupation and to refuse to comply with United Nations resolutions or the desire of the international community to resolve the question of Palestine in conformity

with the relevant Security Council resolutions and, in particular, resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973). Such resolutions affirm the need for the Israeli occupation of Arab territories to end and for the Palestinian people to be empowered to exercise the right to self-determination and to establish an independent State on its native soil."

[Original: Arabic]

Note verbale dated 4 August 2003 from the Permanent Representative of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

"The question of Palestine is regarded by Jordan as a fundamental issue. From the outset, efforts to resolve it have taken up a major part of the attention of the Jordanian leadership. Jordan has therefore worked unremittingly at all levels with a view to arriving at an equitable solution that would restore the legitimate rights of the fraternal Palestinian people as the only means of achieving security and stability in the region. Jordan's conception of such a solution is in keeping with international legitimacy and the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, foremost among them Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973), together with General Assembly resolution 194 (III), which is regarded as the basis for resolving the issue of Palestinian refugees. Accordingly, together with the international family of nations, Jordan is committed to the necessity of achieving a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East on the basis of the United Nations resolutions in implementation of the principle of land for security and recognition, the principle that is the starting point of all international efforts to resolve this enduring conflict.

"On a practical level, this implies the necessity of Israel's withdrawal from all occupied Arab territories to the borders of 4 June 1967, the resolution of the problem of Palestinian refugees on the basis of the guarantee of the right of return and the right to compensation and implementation of the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination in its own national territory. It also implies the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian State enjoying sovereignty over its national territory. That being so, Jordan has welcomed all the international initiatives and efforts, all of which have had the objective of giving effect to that vision. Foremost among those efforts have been the Arab initiative adopted by the Fourteenth Arab Summit in Beirut in 2002 and the initiative of Mr. George Bush, President of the United States of America, in June 2002. In keeping with that, Jordan has been working to create conditions conducive to the resumption of negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli sides, has participated with the international parties involved in the finalization of the "road map" and is now working on its implementation as published after acceptance of it by both parties at the Summit convened in Aqaba, Jordan, on 4 June 2003 and attended by Mr. George Bush, President of the United States of America, Mr. Ariel Sharon, Prime Minister of Israel, and Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, Prime Minister of Palestine. Jordan is convinced that the declaration of a truce by the Palestinian groups is a positive development and

that all parties must work to consolidate it by abiding by their obligations under the road map.

"Furthermore, Jordan has stressed the importance of the role of the United Nations and of the international community in bringing about a comprehensive and just peace in the Middle East and the necessity of not relinquishing support for the Palestinian people and its legitimate leadership until it has obtained its rights. In this context we welcomed the statement by President George Bush of his support for the establishment of a Palestinian State by 2005 living in peace side by side with Israel. We also welcomed the efforts of the Quartet of the United States, the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United Nations.

"Jordan also urged the Ministerial Meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference held in Tehran last May to welcome the road map as an opportunity to strengthen international efforts to end the occupation and to achieve a lasting peace between Palestinians and Israelis leading to the establishment of an independent Palestinian State. The Meeting called for the implementation of the road map as published."

II. Observations

5. The past year witnessed the emergence of some hope of a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For the first time since September 2000, both parties, with the active assistance of the international community, in particular the Quartet (the Russian Federation, the United States of America, the European Union and the United Nations), committed themselves to serious and meaningful negotiations to halt the violence and reach a peaceful settlement. However, renewed violence in the latter half of August 2003 signalled the breakdown of the ceasefire and a reversal in progress. In the renewed cycle of violence and counter-violence, suicide bombings by Palestinian militant groups and targeted assassinations of members of those groups by Israel have regrettably resumed. Consequently, the implementation of the road map has been frozen, and some steps have actually been reversed.

6. Amid the escalation of the conflict in 2002, members of the Quartet jointly elaborated a "road map" to realize the vision of a two-State solution. After consultations with the parties and neighbouring Arab States, agreement was reached on the text of the road map at the meeting of the Quartet principals in Washington, D.C., on 20 December 2002. The performance-based and goal-driven road map presented clear phases, time lines, target dates and benchmarks aimed at the progression by the two parties through reciprocal steps in the political, security, economic, humanitarian and institution-building fields under the auspices of the Quartet. The goal of the road map is to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and end the occupation that began in 1967 on the basis of the 1991 Madrid peace conference, the principle of land for peace, Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973) and 1397 (2002), agreements reached previously by the parties and the Arab Peace Initiative of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, which was endorsed by the Council of the League of Arab States at its summit meeting held in Beirut on 27 and 28 March 2002 (see A/56/1026-S/2002/932, annex II). A settlement would lead to the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbours.

7. With the help of the international community, notable progress has been achieved in reforming the Palestinian Authority. The United Kingdom hosted the Task Force on Palestinian Reform in London on 20 February 2003, which welcomed the Government of Israel's decision to resume monthly transfers of Palestinian tax revenues and the considerable progress made by the Palestinian Authority in its reform efforts, especially in the fiscal sector.

8. On 18 March 2003, President Yasser Arafat approved a bill of amendments to the Palestinian Authority Basic Law to create the post and define the powers of Prime Minister. On 29 April 2003, the Palestinian Legislative Council confirmed Mahmoud Abbas and his new cabinet in office. This was an important step for which Prime Minister Abbas, President Arafat and the Palestinian Legislative Council deserved to be commended. However, early September saw the resignation of Prime Minister Abbas and the nomination of Ahmed Qurei, the Speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council, as his successor.

9. Throughout this period, Israel persisted in its efforts to confine the elected President of the Palestinian Authority, Mr. Arafat, to his headquarters in the West Bank. On 11 September 2003, the Israeli security cabinet agreed in principle on the removal of Mr. Arafat from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. I have strongly urged the Israeli security cabinet to reconsider this decision as I believe that the forcible transfer of Mr. Arafat would be dangerous and counterproductive given the instability in the region.

10. On 30 April 2003, the road map was officially submitted to the parties (see S/2003/529, annex). At the beginning of June 2003, at the Aqaba Summit, organized by President Bush and hosted by Jordan, Prime Ministers Sharon and Abbas made a firm commitment to begin implementation of the road map. In this context, I was encouraged by the resumption of direct contacts and talks between Prime Ministers Sharon and Abbas.

11. The Quartet principals met again in Amman on 22 June 2003 and reviewed the steps needed to begin implementation of the road map. They called upon the Palestinian Authority to make all possible efforts to halt the activities of groups and individuals planning and conducting terror attacks against Israelis. While recognizing Israel's right to self-defence, the Quartet called upon the Government of Israel to respect international humanitarian law and to exert maximum efforts to avoid civilian casualties among the Palestinians. It also pointed out that steps must be taken to improve the humanitarian situation and to normalize the daily lives of the Palestinian people.

12. The first steps taken by the parties to start implementation of the road map included the withdrawal of Israeli forces from parts of the Gaza Strip and Bethlehem and the declaration of a ceasefire by various Palestinian groups, which was arranged with the active involvement of the Egyptian Government. President Bush deployed Ambassador John Wolf to lead the informal monitoring structure of phase I commitments on the ground, in full cooperation with other Quartet members.

13. Over the past year, the situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question, remained the subject of extensive consultations and debates in the Security Council. The Secretariat continued to provide regular informal briefings to the Council on the latest developments in the Middle East.

14. I strongly believe that the principle of parallelism on which the road map is based must be maintained. Previous peace attempts have failed because of their reliance on sequentialism; a crucial role for the international community is to assist the parties to address security, economic, humanitarian and political issues at the same time.

15. The number of casualties in the past three years speaks eloquently to the need to persevere in order to achieve a lasting resolution to the conflict. Since September 2000, more than 2,800 Palestinians and more than 800 Israelis have been killed. Moreover, thousands have been injured. Behind each and every one of these numbers are stories of human loss and suffering. The overwhelming majority of casualties in Israel resulted from terrorist attacks against Israelis by various Palestinian militant groups. Bombs have been set off in cafés and restaurants and attacks have been carried out against public transport, including school buses, creating a climate of fear and constant watchfulness. A large number of Palestinian civilian casualties have resulted from Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations, including incursions, pre-emptive strikes and the practice of targeted assassinations of suspected militants in Palestinian areas. The use of heavy weaponry in densely populated Palestinian areas has been of particular concern. Since the ceasefire and redeployment at the end of June, there has been a marked decline in violence.

16. I remain deeply concerned that most of these deaths resulted from actions that violated basic tenets of international humanitarian law, especially the obligation to protect civilians. I have repeatedly and consistently condemned all terrorist attacks on Israel as morally wrong and counterproductive for the Palestinian cause and have stressed the obligation of the Palestinian Authority to assume full security responsibility in areas still under its control. In addition, I have urged the Government of Israel to refrain from the excessive and disproportionate use of deadly force in civilian areas and, consistent with international humanitarian law, to take steps to ensure the protection of Palestinian civilians.

17. Three United Nations staff members were among the many civilians killed at the start of the period covered in the present report. Iain Hook, a British citizen, was employed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) when he was shot and killed by IDF while in the Jenin camp on 23 November 2002. Two Palestinian employees of UNRWA died in Gaza on 6 December 2002 during Israeli military incursions.

18. Israel continued its policy of demolishing houses as a reaction to security incidents. From 1 January to 21 August 2003, 158 homes of Palestinians who had carried out attacks against Israel or who were suspected of involvement or of planning future attacks were destroyed. Residential apartment blocks have also been demolished following armed clashes between IDF and Palestinian militants.

19. In addition, IDF has demolished hundreds of houses, workshops and agricultural buildings and damaged thousands more, particularly along the Gaza/Egyptian border and in areas bordering Israeli settlements and settler roads in order to create "buffer zones". Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, has been one of the worst-affected areas. In the first quarter of 2003, 161 houses were demolished there, the greatest number of house demolitions in the occupied Palestinian territory since September 2000. Homes and businesses have also been demolished in preparation for the construction of the separation barrier.

20. The confiscation of land and the levelling of agricultural land have continued unabated, particularly in border areas, around settlements and settler roads and in connection with the construction of the separation wall. Thousands of trees have been uprooted and crops destroyed. The most serious destruction has occurred in the northern Gaza Strip in the Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya areas. During the IDF incursion into the Beit Hanoun area in May/June, over 1,000 dunums of land were levelled, and homes and infrastructure were damaged or destroyed.

21. Continued Israeli settlement construction activity and the building of a separation wall are two key challenges to the fulfilment of the road map's goal of the two-State solution. The construction of the separation wall is a unilateral act not in keeping with the road map. Its building has involved the separation of Palestinians from their lands and from each other. Israel's continued expansion of settlements and construction of bypass roads have, over time, made the creation of a viable and contiguous Palestinian State more difficult. Despite the obligation in phase I of the road map to dismantle settlement outposts and to freeze all settlement expansion, the Government of Israel has not taken decisive action in that direction.

22. It has been of great concern that, despite political developments, the humanitarian and economic situation of the Palestinian people continued to deteriorate during the past year. This deterioration was a direct result of the policy of systematic closures and curfews and its impact on Palestinian social and economic life. The World Bank has found that two thirds of the population of the West Bank and Gaza Strip live on less than $2 per day; in fact, the number of the poor has tripled, from 637,000 in September 2000 to nearly 2 million in March 2003. Gross national income per capita has fallen to nearly half of what it was two years before. More than half of the workforce is unemployed, and, more shockingly, more than half of Palestinians are receiving some form of donor-financed food assistance. The limited steps taken so far by Israel to lift closures, curfews and other restrictions have not yet been sufficient to significantly ease the economic deterioration in the occupied Palestinian territory and the humanitarian suffering of the Palestinian people. I remain very concerned that the damage done to Palestinian social and economic spheres may prove difficult to reverse unless meaningful and urgent steps are taken to lift closures and curfews and to allow normal life to resume.

23. The humanitarian situation was worsened this year by unprecedented movement restrictions imposed on United Nations and non-governmental organization personnel, especially limiting their access into and out of the Gaza Strip. For most of May, a significant number of United Nations staff were stuck on either side of the Erez boundary and were unable to carry out their humanitarian tasks. Those policies violated the privileges and immunities of United Nations personnel and ran counter to Israel's obligations under international humanitarian law as the occupying Power to provide for the well-being of the people of Gaza.

24. The inter-agency United Nations humanitarian action plan, released in November 2002, includes activities to reinforce existing relief programmes and to provide temporary assistance to the affected population in priority sectors such as food security, health, education, employment generation and agricultural production to help mitigate the devastating impact of repeated military incursions, closures, curfews and economic decline. Up to mid-September, a total of $106,467,347 had

been provided by donor Governments, or 37.4 per cent of the amount needed to cover all activities outlined in the humanitarian action plan.

25. The humanitarian action plan also includes a recommendation that humanitarian indicators be tracked and reported, in particular the commitments made by the Government of Israel to my Personal Humanitarian Envoy, Catherine Bertini. A monthly humanitarian monitoring report, issued by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, tracks the humanitarian indicators and commitments. During the reporting period the Office documented an overall decline in the humanitarian situation in all but one area, namely curfews.

26. As the General Assembly has underscored on many occasions, achieving a final and peaceful settlement of the question of Palestine, the core issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict, is imperative for the attainment of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East. Therefore I hope that, as called for in the road map, there will also be movement on the Syrian and Lebanese tracks so that peace, security and stability will be achieved for all in the region on the basis of Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973).

27. For its part, the United Nations will continue to support the peace process and will remain at the forefront of efforts to alleviate the severe social and economic hardships of the Palestinian people. To that end, I will continue to press for the implementation of the road map, which I still believe provides the best opportunity to move forward. I will continue to maintain close and regular contact with other members of the Quartet, as well as with the parties, regional leaders and the wider international community, to encourage progress in these difficult and critical times. The active engagement of the international community continues to be needed at this critical juncture.

28. I call upon the international community to provide the resources necessary to support United Nations programmes in addressing the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation of the Palestinian people, and especially to provide adequate funding to UNRWA so that it can continue to deliver the necessary services to the Palestinian refugees. Donor assistance is especially vital at a time when the humanitarian situation is so critical.

29. I should like to pay special tribute to Terje Roed-Larsen, United Nations Special Coordinator and my Personal Representative to the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian Authority, to the staff of the Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator in the Occupied Territories and to Commissioner-General Peter Hansen of UNRWA, the staff of the Agency and all other United Nations agencies, which continue to provide their sterling services while working under most demanding and difficult circumstances.